

Anthro notes

National Museum of Natural History Newsletter for Teachers

vol. 9 no. 1 winter 1987

STUDENTS EXPLORE THEIR COMMUNITY'S PAST

[Editor's Note:

How can students and teachers become more involved in the archeology of their communities? A particularly ambitious and successful archeology project involving a school/community partnership in collaboration with a professional archeologist is described in the following article. Many other avenues exist for student/teacher involvement in archeology. Professional archeologists employed by state, city, and county governments to coordinate and supervise archeological research are often dependent on volunteer labor both in the field and in the laboratory. Several states including Maryland are developing state-wide archeology

curricula that may involve a field experience. Local archeology societies not only welcome interested high school students and teachers at their meetings but may also offer training in a national certification program for amateur archeologists. (See also "Summer Opportunities," p.5.)

What is the goal of archeologists excavating the roots of their own communities? Isn't archeology the pursuit of the alien past--of jungle-covered ruins, Indian arrowheads, pyramids and "the temple of doom"? Until recently, due to the short time depth of the historic period in North America, American archeologists were indeed primarily interested in the



SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION
1995
LIBRARIES

prehistoric antecedents of Native Americans, and, to a lesser extent, in prehistoric and classical antiquities abroad. As a result, American archeology was closely tied to the anthropological study of Native American cultures.

In recent years, however, American anthropologists have turned in increasing numbers to the study of modern American culture. At the same time, archeologists working in the U.S. are becoming more involved in the pursuit of the familiar, of the material remains of historic America. The archeological remains of the activities of ordinary people carry different messages from the historical writings of an educated elite. As a result, the historical archeologist often finds that an archeological perspective provides a new and somewhat alien view of a once familiar past. Archeology tells us, for example, that the Plymouth settlers were economically dependent on dairy cattle (and may rarely, if ever, have eaten turkey); that slaves in coastal Georgia maintained a dominant African identity into the 19th century and also had access to guns for hunting; and that the increasing separation of the home and the workplace, which began in the 18th century, is an important factor in the emergence of characteristic American town and city plans. Archeology offers a different perspective on our own past and will continue to provide an important, although not unbiased, counterweight to the biases of recorded history.

A word of caution: It is important for anyone who finds ancient artifacts or is interested in the archeological sites pertaining to American history to work with local authorities and professional archeologists, as in the case presented here. Failure to do so may destroy important information and may violate the laws enacted to protect our buried heritage.]

STUDENTS EXPLORE THEIR COMMUNITY'S PAST

Much of our nation's archeological heritage is being lost to fast-paced suburban development. Nowhere is this more true than just outside Washington, D.C. in Montgomery County, Maryland. As high school teachers of history and anthropology, we have felt frustrated in speaking in the abstract about a past whose tenuous reality around and beneath us is quickly disappearing.

We became friends during the 1981 school year when we both taught at Magruder High School in Rockville, Maryland. Our common interest in archeology led to discussions about the gloomy situation in our county and the need for student archeology programs. To our surprise and good fortune, a combination of circumstances created many excellent opportunities for our students. First, our participating in the Smithsonian Institution/George Washington University "Anthropology for Teachers Program" helped focus our thinking with new knowledge and perspectives about anthropology and archeology. Our interest in involving our students in archeology, however, lay fallow for several years. Then, in the spring of 1984, Bob Hines received an offer that pushed us into action. Five years after a professional archeological survey, Chevy Chase Savings and Loan planned to convert an 18th century home, the "Magruder House", at the Locust Grove farmstead, into a branch office. Would Bob's high school students be interested in salvaging artifacts for display at the branch? Bob recruited some of his students and invited Bill Ring, now at neighboring Rockville High, to join.

What followed was a hopeful--if crude--student exploration of archeology. We scrambled to gather tools and build sifters and then went to work around the structure's kitchen-wing. We tried to be as systematic in our procedures as the imminent construction deadline would

permit. The bulldozers stood parked on the lot as our students learned to set up a datum point, take elevations, and plot excavation units. Working during spring vacation and several Saturdays, we salvaged eight days of experience before construction work swamped the site.

Eight days of digging produced 3,000 artifacts. These kept our students busy through the spring and into the summer. They cleaned and catalogued their finds and entered them into a computer-profile of the site. A selection of artifacts was arranged for display at the Locust Grove Branch office. That summer the students presented a report on their work to the Montgomery County Historical Preservation Commission.

The overwhelming positive response from the students and the community encouraged us to organize archeology clubs at each of our schools. To increase our effectiveness in future salvage work, we sought professional assistance and a secure site for training our students and ourselves more systematically. Fortunately, the Locust Grove Project had brought us together with Mark Walston and Mike Dwyer, historians with the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. In the autumn of 1984, Mark led us to a series of sites on M.N.C.P.P.C. land suitable for sustained work and feasible for later development into public interpretive programs. We settled on an 18th/19th century gristmill site called Valley Mill along Paint Branch in eastern Montgomery County. Armed with Mike Dwyer's historical report on the area, we were ready to establish a training and research program.

Access to funding was essential although our students eagerly raised some money from weekend car-washes. Both Magruder and Rockville High Schools advanced us funds to purchase a transit to begin a survey. We also

received funding from a variety of other institutions, including two successive grants of \$2500 from the Montgomery County Historical Preservation Commission; gifts from several Lion's Clubs and other local community service organizations; and a three-year grant of \$3,000 from the Chevy Chase Savings and Loan in recognition of our 1984 project. In 1986, we also received a grant from The Washington Post for innovation in education.

Thanks to these grants, we could continue our work with the guidance of a professional consultant, Paula Zitzler of the National Park Service. Ms. Zitzler, a specialist in industrial archeology, came to us after running a field school for high school students in Pennsylvania. She knew mills quite well, and her expertise steered us clear of many snags.

Our preparations at the Valley Mill site were slow and deliberate. In October 1984 we began the site survey and laid out a grid system. To gain some appreciation for site formation and what might later be found in the ground, our students visited other local mills in various states of preservation. They explored the Paint Branch stream valley to get a physical sense of the complexity described in the historical reports.

Valley Mill obviously offered a number of research opportunities. It was an area of intense early industrial activity and may also include several prehistoric sites. The visible remnant of the gristmill represented the terminal stage of the county's earliest industry. The mill contains a water turbine, installed in 1879, the only such power system still in place in Maryland.

By April 1985, we were ready to excavate. We broke ground on a cold, overcast day during spring vacation. The first day's proceedings came to a

halt with a snow squall. But by the end of the week, we had opened the core of our current operation. Beginning with a sampling of 5' x 5' units on a north-south axis, the students searched for remnants of a penstock in the mill race in order to determine just how water was fed into the turbine. We continued the line of units southward outside the east wall of the foundation. We hoped to date the wall's construction and find evidence of a sawmill recorded in operation in the 1880's.

The excavation process was gradual and careful in order to extract maximum amounts of information. We were fortunate to have a thick, disturbed layer in which students could refine their trowel technique and learn mapping procedures. We did not reach undisturbed soil in any units until the spring of 1986. By that time we had established that another, perhaps older structure, had once stood next to the visible foundation. Since this discovery, most of our effort has gone into determining the structure's nature and extent. Could it be the sawmill or an earlier incarnation of the main mill (which had been twice rebuilt, according to written records)? A 1986 summer field school season was designed to solve this mystery, as well as to confirm the manufacturer and model of the turbine and to determine the spatial relationships of the machinery within the mill. Our summer season did confirm that the turbine matched that of the historical record, but the foundations proved so extensive that the mystery of the mill's identity remains unsolved. The existing above ground foundations appear to be a 19th century modification of an earlier mill but further investigation in 1987 will be necessary to confirm this tentative hypothesis.

During the winter, we switch to lab operations. The National Park Service provided us space at their Applied Archeology Center, recently relocated

to a former Montgomery County Junior high school. With Paula Zitzler's help, the students now have access to professional facilities and a wide range of expertise in the identification and conservation of artifacts.

How can the educational benefits of these projects be assessed? Observing the students' changing attitudes and behavior offers positive feedback. Most students had little idea how demanding their involvement would become. A few came to us with an Indiana-Jones mentality, with questions such as "How much is this worth?" "Why can't I dig straight down?" "Why do I have to keep notes?" Those who have stuck with it have come to cultivate a stoic patience in sometimes unyielding ground. The longer they have applied themselves, the more conscientious and systematic they have become. Many of the most stalwart seniors last year and this have indicated their intentions to take college anthropology and archeology courses, and at least one has become committed to a professional career in archeology.

Such a complex undertaking created the need for student leadership and initiative. We have been pleased to see students mature as they accepted responsibility for managing various phases of the project. Tasks have included a herculean effort in keeping our field records in order, budgeting funds, accounting for equipment and artifacts, training newcomers in the intricacies of mapping and elevation-drawing, and designing a computer program adequate to our needs. Some students have searched for historical information, both photographs and documents, and have scoured the local area for the recycled remnants of the mill's dismantled frame portion. Others have acted as liaisons with professional archeologists, park and government officials, and community

(continued on p.14)

(continued from p.4)

leaders. Some have even arranged press conferences and organized open houses. Several took major responsibility for organizing an all-night "dig-a-thon" fundraiser that gained community support as well as dollars for our project. Our work generated significant good-will in the surrounding community, and many have stopped by the site to hear an impromptu talk by our students.

Coverage in the local press about the Magruder-Rockville project at Valley Mill has resulted in several further opportunities for us and our students. Three elementary school teachers arranged field trips for their classes to visit, including one teacher of a former student now in our archeology club. During the summer of 1985 we hosted a field school through the pilot program "Discover Maryland Archeology", funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and directed by Dr. Robert Evans, educational coordinator of Jefferson Patterson Park. During the summer of 1986 we established a cooperative program with Montgomery College, with Bob offering a course in archeology with a field component at Valley Mill for 24 young students from throughout the county. A grant from the Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission provided these students with tool kits, seminars with professional consultants, and field trips to Jefferson Patterson Archeology Park in Calvert County. About one-half of these summer students then became active volunteers in a new salvage operation this past fall.

Back in 1985, after we had finished the Magruder House Project, we hoped we might someday be called on again to undertake salvage work. In February 1986, our students did receive a call, and they assisted in a professional survey of possible mill sites north of Valley Mill. Later that spring we found ourselves called again, this time in connection with a salvage operation

that Gramm-Rudman cuts had affected. A planned extension of Woodmont Avenue, to run across the National Institutes of Health campus on Wisconsin Avenue, was scheduled for construction in March 1987. Funding had been provided for Phase I and II: an archeological survey and test pit exploration of the grassy hillside. No funds, however, were to be available for phase III: recovery. This seemed tragic for a site that lacked even plow-zone disturbance in a thoroughly churned up area of Montgomery County. In February, NIH officials accepted our offer to conduct a phase III recovery, and we were granted right of entry by the campus supervisor. Again, Paula Zitzler acted as professional consultant.

During the summer of 1986, students surveyed and mapped the site. Despite hard-baked, drought-dried soil, three 5'x 5' test units were begun. These and the six subsequent units opened in October were located according to artifact concentrations disclosed by earlier professional surveys. We hope to recover 20% of the site before road construction begins in March. At that time, we will finish analyzing our data to see if our tentative hypothesis is correct: that we are excavating a seasonal camp and tool manufacturing area--right next to the parking lot of the Ramada Inn!

The National Institutes of Health dig has become a community outreach program as well, as we have come to know the Edgewood Glenwood citizen's association. Neighborhood families and youth soccer teams have joined our Saturday sessions. Our students have trained these newcomers to use trowels and sifters, and community leaders have encouraged us to join their larger efforts to preserve as much undeveloped land as possible along Wisconsin Avenue. A salvage operation suits our needs well, for without our efforts all we have found would have been lost. Our volunteer students, working with us on Saturdays and vacations, can take great

pride in their contribution not only to their own education but also to the community's awareness of its own rich past. We hope these activities--at NIH as well as at Valley Mill--will broaden into a continuous outreach program for students at all levels as well as for the general public.

Already, we have gone farther than we could have imagined two years ago. In August 1986 we submitted our first written report, "The Report of Archaeological Investigations at the Valley Mill Site 18M0253" to the National Park Service. Our five consultants were pleased: Dr. June Evans and Paula Zitzler, archeologists with American University; Mike Dwyer and Mark Walston, historians with the NMNPPC; and Jane Sween, librarian with the Montgomery County Historical Library. We have generated historical

and archeological awareness among students and the community. Perhaps our past will be treated more gently by the community as a result. For us, the project represents the essence of education as a process of discovery whose ends cannot be predicted. Anthropology in general, and archeology in particular, has helped us guide our students through that process with excitement and commitment. We could ask nothing more from teaching.

Robert P. Hines
European History
Magruder High School
Rockville, Maryland

William A. Ring Jr.
Anthropology
Rockville High School
Rockville, Maryland

